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Catching fleeting memories: Victim forums as mediated remembering communities

If I cite an internet article by Microsoft today, I must reckon with the fact that the cited link will disappear perhaps even tomorrow, and, at the latest in five to ten years time. (Sick, 2004: 60) ¹

Franziska Sick's anxiety that texts published on the internet might disappear overnight points towards one of the most significant characteristics of the new media, and one which marks them apart from older forms. The fleeting nature of electronic and digital media is also one of the key reasons why cultural theorists have doubted their use value as sites of memory. It is not only the World Wide Web which appears to offer both unlimited capacity for storing data *and* the ability instantly to forget what has been recorded. Storage hardware changes almost continually: in the last twenty years we have seen the dominance of the now obsolete floppy disks, through CD-ROMs, to the currently favoured USB-sticks. As we change the hardware, unless we transfer the data, we lose our ability to read material stored perhaps as little as five years previously (see Hoskins, 2009a; Sick, 2004; Van House and Churchill, 2008).

However, following Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading (2009: 3), closer examination of the relationship between new media and memory reveals not that digital media have destroyed our ability to remember, but that existing paradigms of the relationship between media and memory and associated theoretical models are ‘inadequate for understanding the profound impact of the supreme accessibility, transferability and circulation of digital content: on how individuals, groups and societies come to remember and forget’. Central to this is the concept of the democratisation of memory, or the creation of ‘history from below’, as more and more sectors of society gain access to the tools required to give media form to their memories and offer them for public consumption (Garde-Hansen et al., 2009: 8-19). Moreover, connectivity and digital social networks that cross geographical and even temporal boundaries have reshaped the way individuals and groups interact and share memory (see van Dijck, 2007: 48; Hoskins, 2009b: 40-41). Indeed, even if you do not share the unbridled optimism of many commentators with regard to the internet’s capacity for memory, as Martin Zierold (2006: 181) notes, ‘the possibility is nonetheless clear, that interest-based groups might actually establish themselves online, and it is absolutely conceivable that memory processes on the internet would be used for their stabilisation’.

One medium that might promote the formation of such groups is internet discussion forums. Discussion forums – an interactive form of Bulletin Board system – have become a common feature of websites targeted at specific interest groups,

including those based around a shared experience of suffering or trauma. These ubiquitous forums allow individuals to communicate experiences and practical or emotional advice with others, often anonymously. They range from sites dedicated to political violence (as discussed in this essay), victims of child abuse (see www.sssalas.com/EmotionalHealing.html), cancer sufferers (see www.cancerforums.net), or those with common illnesses, such as asthma (for example, http://ehealthforum.com/health/asthma_forum.html). This article takes as its case study the discussion forum of www.stasiopfer.de² [www.stasivictims.de], a website that aims to offer information and support to those who suffered political persecution in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Active between 2001 and 2008, the forum was initiated and moderated by Mario Falcke, himself a victim of oppression by the East German secret police (Staatssicherheitsdienst, or ‘Stasi’), and from 2003 was run under the auspices of the not-for-profit organisation, Spurensuche e.V, which aimed to offer financial and legal assistance and advice to victims of injustice in the GDR. The forum was transferred to the Robert Havemann Society in 2008, and the domain returned to Falcke in 2010 (see www.stasiopfer.de, 2010c).

Paul Cooke (2004: 207) situates www.stasiopfer.de in the context of the rapidly increasing number of sites dedicated to memories and representations of the GDR in German virtual space; however, he notes that the majority of these sites focus not on dictatorship and state violence, but on ‘more positive aspects of GDR culture and

society' (2004: 212-213). Building on Cooke's analysis of uses of the virtual sphere by different groups of East Germans to express a positive cultural and social identity, this article examines the potential of victim discussion forums to function not only as sites of communication between individuals with particular shared experiences, but also as archives of memory, including memory of suffering and persecution. My analysis will be connected to the question of communicative and cultural memory through consideration of the ways in which individuals use this new technology to create virtual remembering communities, and the implications this may have for our wider understanding of how memories circulate in a given society.

Communicative v. Cultural Memory

It is not only the fragility of the data recorded in electronic media that has been a cause for concern in terms of cultural memory. The speed with which the new media can transfer information and the distances that can be covered with relative ease have led to a sense that time and space are compressed. Andreas Huyssen (1995: 9) describes the effect as a 'world of information networks that function entirely according to principles of synchronicity while providing us with multiple images and narratives of the non-synchronous'. Aleida Assmann (1996: 132) suggests that the electronic mass media create 'an absolute present', in which 'the consciousness of a past silently evaporates in the cycles of continuous production and consumption'. The postmodern individual, in control of the new media, is no longer bound to her particular geographical location, but

can experience, at a mouse-click, cultural products from the other side of the world. Cultural memory is thus increasingly diverse and may not have the power to create a coherent social group. Huyssen (1995: 7) describes the result as a 'culture of amnesia' and considers the current boom in interest in memory to be an attempt 'to resist the dissolution of time in the synchronicity of the archive, [...] to claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non-synchronicity, and information overload'.

However, this understanding of cultural memory, primarily represented by Jan and Aleida Assmann, as centring on large national, religious or class-based communities and as being clearly distinct from communicative memory, has met with criticism over recent years, particularly in terms of its applicability for postmodern societies and new forms of media. In the Assmannian model, communicative memory is based on oral communication between individuals or within intimate remembering groups (particularly families). As such, it is contingent on the human mind and cannot survive beyond three to four generations:

Communicative memory incorporates memories that relate to the recent past. They are memories that the individual shares with his or her peers. The typical example is generational memory. This form of memory is granted to the group in historical terms; it emerges with time and disappears with it, or to be precise: with its bearers. (J. Assmann, 1992: 50)

In contrast, cultural memory in the Assmannian model relates not to lived experience; rather, it incorporates the foundational memories of the social and cultural group to which it pertains. Cultural memory does not, therefore, rely on biological memory for its survival; instead, it is fixed in cultural artefacts or media, such as ritual, dance, myths or canonical texts (J. Assmann, 1992: 51-52).

Zierold (2006: 89) considers the Assmannian model to be too static and argues that it fails to encompass the processes involved in the production of cultural and social memory. He contends that, where in less differentiated societies there may indeed be a qualitative division between mediated memories of an absolute past and living memory transmitted by individuals across three to four generations, in contemporary society the majority of knowledge is transmitted in medial form, whether it refers to an absolute past, the memories of our parents' generation, or the present (Zierold, 2006: 92). In this sense, the clear-cut distinction between cultural and communicative memory represents what José van Dijck (2007: 21) has described as a 'fallacious binary' that confines media 'to private or public areas' and ignores their 'dynamic nature' and the 'constantly evolving relations between self and others, private and public, past and future'. Indeed, as Erll (2011a: 128-130; 2011b: 30-31) argues, the concept of high culture, essential to the Assmannian understanding of cultural memory, does not mesh readily with new semiotic and anthropological understandings of culture as everyday practice and life world. She criticises the polarised opposition of communicative and cultural memory,

arguing that, at a given historical moment, the same event can be the subject of both forms of reflection on the past.

For Erll (2011a: 129-132; 2011b: 32-33), the distinction between cultural and communicative memory is not a distinction between media forms, or between memories of an absolute past and of more recent history. Instead, it is the reception of the memories that is key, not the form they take or the events they refer to: communicative memories are memories that are received as part of the lived experience of a particular social group; cultural memory, in contrast, is memory of past events that are viewed as founding experiences with normative or formative implications for the entire cultural formation. In place of the concept of a singular cultural memory, Erll (2011a: 36-37 and 133) argues for the concept of memory cultures [Erinnerungskulturen], which result from the heteronomous makeup of differentiated societies. This plurality of memory cultures is mirrored in turn by a plurality of remembering communities [Erinnerungsgemeinschaften], with competing or co-existing memory interests, memorial media, social institutions and culturally specific schemata or collective codes (Erll, 2011a: 116). This concept of plurality in forms of memory, in memory communicated within social groups *and* memory with broader cultural significance, would seem particularly relevant for contemporary, 'media culture societies' (Schmidt 1998: 55), in which the individual is surrounded by a plethora of images and cultural products relating to the past.

Discussion forums are primarily used as a medium of communication, not necessarily as a medium of memory. Nonetheless, the importance of communication, and particularly conversation, in the process of remembering has been underscored by a number of commentators. Harald Welzer (2002: 165) demonstrates how pasts are created and modified in the process of oral narration and, in the context of the family, have the role of building coherence and identity within intimate remembering communities. Aleida Assmann (2006: 24-28) describes how communicative memory is constructed through “‘memory talk’” in a process of ‘team work’ [Teamarbeit], in which individual memories are networked with the memories of others within the remembering group (cf. Erll, 2011a: 101; Erll, 2011b: 90). In this article, I consider how communication functions in the immediate, but mediated, space of internet forums and how it produces memory. Does this media form promote the formation of a community, and, if so, what form does this community take? What does this indicate about the role of the new media, and specifically online communication, in the process of remembering? If we take a more differentiated approach to our understanding of cultural and communicative memory, where does the medium of the internet discussion forum fall on the continuum and interaction between the two?

‘In’ and ‘Out’ Groups

The website www.stasiopfer.de defines itself as a site dedicated to the working through [Aufarbeitung] of Germany’s Stasi past. The ‘word of greeting’ sets the site in the

context of ongoing debates on the nature of the GDR and the role of the Stasi within it, stating that the ‘authentic view of the victims’ is often missing. The aim of the website, and the organisation behind it, Spurensuche e.V., is to ‘provide the public with facts and authentic eyewitness information’ and to give those affected ‘the opportunity to pass on their experiences’ (www.stasiopfer.de, 2010b). Moreover, the site contains information relating to the methods, structures and personnel of the Stasi under various rubrics, as well as a selection of example Stasi files. The site is thus offered as a memory trigger, to which users may respond by contributing to the discussion forum or the guest book.

With regard to the potential development of a remembering community, this framework also plays an important role in identifying who belongs, or is entitled to belong, to the remembering group. In their study of online communities, Yuqing Ren, Robert Kraut and Sara Kiesler (2007) apply two theories of community make-up to the virtual world: common identity and common bond theory. In communities based on common identity, members identify with the group as a whole; in bond-based communities, members are attached to particular individuals within the group (Ren et al., 2007: 380). The discussion forum of www.stasiopfer.de would seem, under these criteria, to fall clearly into the category of an identity-based community. According to Ren, Kraut and Kiesler (2007: 382), the causes of common identity in such communities might be a shared goal or purpose, or the simple (self-) definition of a group of individuals as belonging to a specific social category. We can see from the above that

the framework of www.stasiopfer.de constructs both a common purpose, coming to terms with the Stasi past, and a common social category for the remembering group, that is, the ‘Stasi victims’ in the name of the site.

Moreover, according to Ren, Kraut and Kiesler (2007: 387), one of the key features of common identity communities is ‘intergroup comparisons’, which intensify commitment to the ‘in’ group through ‘raising the salience of out-groups’. Through the use of specific linguistic devices, the framing of www.stasiopfer.de draws the boundaries of who does and does not belong to the ‘in’ group of the remembering community. As seen above, the stated aims of the website suggest that its purpose is to act as a transmission medium between ‘eyewitnesses’ and ‘the public’. The ‘public’ is thereby constructed as a passive recipient of the active remembering of the eyewitnesses – not as a potential partner in the process of working through the GDR past. The concept of the eyewitness itself is also restricted to individuals with a very specific experience of the East German state: in the ‘word of greeting’, perpetrators, who were also literal witnesses to the remembered events, are accused of ‘suppressing their responsibility’ (www.stasiopfer.de, 2010b), but, perhaps unsurprisingly, their perspective is not accorded any space on a site clearly dedicated to the victims of Stasi oppression. In the FAQs, the authors of the site state that they reject ‘any form of trivialisation of the repressive and dictatorial history of the GDR. We warn against the abuse of democracy by many of *our* former perpetrators’ (www.stasiopfer.de, 2010a –

my emphasis). The use of ‘our’, and ‘we’ in opposition to the ‘perpetrators’ constructs an ‘in’ and ‘out’ group of individuals. The definition of particular views of the GDR as a ‘trivialisation’ excludes from the remembering community former GDR citizens whose memories are not of the repressive and dictatorial aspects of this highly complex society.

This linguistic construction of group belonging is reflected in the communication between individuals on the discussion forum. A good example of this is seen in a discussion thread relating to ‘victim pensions’ [Opferrente] and the perceived tardiness of official bodies in ensuring that those entitled to these additional benefits receive the money they are owed. In the thread *Payment of the victim pension*, begun on 22 December 2007, the discussant ‘Jörg’ states: ‘In future, no progress will be made in the payment of victim pensions if *we* continue to keep quiet. *We* must not allow ourselves to be influenced by people who write on a forum that *we* must all be patient’ (my emphasis).³ Without explicitly stating who ‘we’ might include, ‘Jörg’ thereby makes it clear that it is not simply those who write in the forum, but that other criteria apply. The individual user is only considered part of the ‘we’ if they are also identified (and identify) as belonging to the social category of the ‘in’ group, that of Stasi victim: ‘Jörg’'s statement suggests that he does not consider that those who wrote posts calling for patience fulfil these criteria.

The categorisation as Stasi victim is, in part, constructed on the basis of present experience: questions relating to, for example, reading one's Stasi files, claiming the victim pension, or finding a child after a forced adoption, are prominent on the forum. However, despite 'Jörg's rejection of users who appear to have different political views from his own, it is not consensus with regard to contemporary concerns that binds these individuals – they are happy to argue amongst themselves, without this disagreement necessarily disrupting group ties. An example of this is seen in the contributor 'Richter's response to 'Jörg'. Although 'Richter' disagrees with 'Jörg's call to write to the Bundespräsident in protest, he does not exclude 'Jörg' from the constructed 'in' group, stating '*we* know that the implementation [of the victim pensions] is the duty of the regional government. Please don't simply put out such tips without any background knowledge. Shouting any old slogans does not serve *our* cause' (my emphasis).

The members of the 'in' group may not share all current political views or contemporary concerns; however, they do claim to share the past experiences upon which these issues are based: political imprisonment and oppression at the hands of the SED or Stasi. Individuals frequently introduce themselves with an outline of their 'credentials' in this regard: 'Gerd' states that he was twice a political prisoner in the GDR and wasn't 'bought free' by West Germany;⁴ in her first post on the 16 November 2007, 'Sabine' states that she, like the discussant 'Kati1407', also lost her child through forced adoption; on 29 November 2007, the contributor 'Aziru' outlines her experiences

as a political prisoner and asks if others fear reading their Stasi files as she does. In this respect, this virtual remembering community is constructed in a similar way to remembering communities in the 'real' world, that is, on the basis of both political and practical concerns in the present and an assumed shared set of past experiences and memories. We might draw direct parallels to the remembering communities within 'real' world victim groups. In reference to her work on two Associations for Victims of Stalinism in Magdeburg, Anselma Gallinat (2006: 356-357) notes that, within these associations, the interaction of victims serves contemporary concerns relating to the work of the organisation; however, her observation that, at these weekly meetings, conversation frequently returns to the experience of Stasi persecution, indicates that the shared past is central to the identity of the group.

Indeed, as can be seen from the above exchanges, the distinction between the 'real' and 'virtual' worlds is not clear cut. It is political, social and personal concerns relating to the shared past that arise outside of the virtual space of the forum that motivate the majority of the posts, and thereby the construction of community, not the website or forum itself. The site may, for some posters, act as an alternative to 'real-world' victim associations (of which there are a number in Germany), but for others it appears to function as a supplement to these, or a method of finding individuals with whom they might interact offline, as well as via the forum. An example of this is seen in the response of 'Peter Z.' to 'Kati1407''s account of losing her son. After a request for

help finding the child was posted by 'Mea', 'Peter Z.' states that he cannot offer help without further details relating to the political nature of the adoption and asks that the mother get in contact with him personally. 'Peter Z.' later indicates that 'Kati1407' has been in touch, and that they are working on her case together. In this way, the possibility of connecting with others in virtual space does not necessarily replace their social networking offline, but provides individuals with the tools to expand the scope of their network or remembering group. As Klaus Beck (2006: 169) argues, the division between virtual and real communication is, in any case, a false binary: 'social relationships have been conducted via mediated communication for a long time (e.g. by letter or telephone), without us referring to the virtual community of the letter writer or the telephonist'. A comparable site, www.stasiopferinfo.com, which consists entirely of different forums for victims of political persecution in the GDR, appears to be linked even more directly with the structures of advice and support available outside the World Wide Web, with pages devoted to criticism of and suggestions for the victim organisations.

A key difference in the virtual world is, however, that the right of the community members to belong to the remembering group cannot be verified by anything other than the textual memory they produce in the forum: put more simply, they might not be who they say they are, and might not have had the experiences that they say they have had. This, of course, might also be the case in the 'real' world;

however, in the context of the forum, the group cannot rely on physical clues, gestures or expressions, but only on the text itself. Questions of identity and deception take on a new dimension in the disembodied virtual world, in which, as Judith S. Donath (1999: 29) notes, ‘many of the basic cues about personality and social role we are accustomed to in the physical world are absent’ (cf. Crystal, 2001: 34). Sybille Krämer (1998: 87) argues that the potential for anonymity (even where this is not used) upturns the usual rules of oral or written communication by removing the link to an individual. She states that on discussion forums, ‘a form of telematic interaction is developing which we can hardly continue to view as an authentic expression of personal attitudes and an instance of interpersonal reference’.

In his statement, *Goodbye and new start – personal declaration* [Abschied und Neubeginn – Persönliche Erklärung], written shortly before the archiving of the site on 22 December 2007, Falcke notes that the site managers had, in the past, been forced to restrict access to the site, so that only registered visitors could write in the forum and guest book: ‘The internet not only tempts so-called trolls into destructive behaviour – increasingly rightwing extremists, conspiracy theorists and other dubious people also vented their political aversions and aggressions in the form of illegal pronouncements’. This demonstrates how the community can exclude posters who are felt to be destructive to the group as a whole and who do not identify with its shared purpose. However, in the virtual world, restriction of the community membership in this way can

only be carried out on the basis that the online posts are an authentic representation of the poster's present political views and past experience. As Krämer (1998: 87) notes, 'strictly speaking, in the computerised network we only interact with ideas and no longer with people'. The community can, therefore, only exclude ideas and attitudes, not necessarily the individuals who hold these views. Members who effectively conceal their physical self in a second online identity would not be detected. Memories are always constructed in the present, and an individual may always lie about their past; however, it is a particular risk of this medium that memories exchanged within the community might have no authentic basis whatsoever in physical experience. It is a particular quality of the mediation through the forum, the potential for anonymity and deception, which brings about this difference in the nature of communication between individuals within the remembering group. This effect is closely linked to the textuality of the medium, its freedom 'from the body's unifying anchor' and, as will be seen, the construction of temporal immediacy (see Donath, 1999: 29).

Remembering between orality and textuality

Ren, Kraut and Kiesler (2007: 389) argue that 'communication is the core of many online communities, with collective action, exchanges of social support, and sense of community rooted in the conversations that members of the community have with each other'. Although, as I have argued above, the community of www.stasiopfer.de is based on a claim to a shared identity and past, rather than bonds between individual members,

this does not mean that personal interaction between individuals does not take place. In fact, linguistic intimacy between the individual contributors is common. Most users use the familiar ‘du’ or ‘ihr’ forms, despite the fact that they have never met their interlocutor(s) in person. Interestingly, in his retort to ‘Richter’, in the above exchange, ‘Jörg’ uses the capitalised ‘Du’ form, generally reserved for written correspondence, indicating a tacit awareness of the textuality of this media form.

As an identity-based community, the vast majority of communication on the forum is restricted to issues relevant to the constructed social category of the users or the stated purpose of the group (see Ren et al., 2007: 389). However, users also reveal information relevant to them as individuals. On 4 January 2008, for example, ‘Jörg’ states that he has received notice that he has been approved for the victim pension. Moreover, users actively request that this information be provided, showing a keen interest in the experiences of their fellow community members, where these are relevant to the group as a whole. After ‘Peter Z.’ has asked for more details from ‘Kati1407’ before he agrees to help find her son, on 29 October 2007 ‘Kati1407’ states that she has responded to ‘Peter Z.’ ‘privately’. The user ‘insulaner’ then asks if the ‘interested reader’ can expect to be updated at some point on the progress and success of the case.

Indeed, analysts of communication on the internet have noted that the medium in fact appears to promote readiness to divulge information that one might not be willing to share in face-to-face interaction. Naomi S. Baron (2000: 233) argues that electronic

communication media appear to protect private space, as one cannot see or hear one's interlocutor. She notes that social psychologists have observed that 'the lack of visual cues [...] markedly increases the degree to which speakers are willing to make personal disclosures (passing judgements, expressing feelings, revealing health concerns) that they would hesitate to reveal face-to-face' (cf. Beck, 2006: 178). 'Aziru's post regarding her fear of reading her Stasi file offers a clear example of this effect. 'Aziru' states that she was imprisoned in the GDR for three years at the end of the 1970s, until she was 'bought free' by West Germany. Her son was allowed to join her in the West after her release and, although she has told him of her imprisonment, and the location of and reason for her incarceration, she has not discussed her experiences with him in any detail. She fears 'rummaging around in the past', and states that the very thought of it makes her feel unwell and causes insomnia and uncharacteristic rage. Although 'Aziru' hides these physical symptoms of trauma from those she encounters in her everyday life, she is willing to share these problems with the forum community. The anonymity of the medium and the protection of private space lead to a more intimate exchange – an intimacy that might be achieved only after a period of trust- and relationship-building in a community based on face-to-face interaction.

These personal exchanges between users also help to create a sense of community cohesion within the forum: users are aware of intimate details relating to other members, even though these details are often attached only to a pseudonym. In

this context, as noted by Donath (1999: 53), it is important to distinguish between pseudonymity and pure anonymity: ‘a pseudonym, though it may be untraceable to a real-world person, may have a well-established reputation in the virtual domain; a pseudonymous message may thus come with a wealth of contextual information about the sender’. An anonymous community is, as Donath (1999: 54) notes, an oxymoron; we should rather consider the communities, such as the one formed on the discussion forum of www.stasiopfer.de, as ‘pseudonymous’: individual users can, through repeated posting, build a virtual reputation and personality, which others will associate with their username.

In that many of the personal interactions are based on memory, these exchanges also cement the group as a remembering community. This is seen particularly clearly in the thread relating to the search for ‘Kati1407’'s son, forcibly adopted in the GDR. As has been indicated above, ‘Kati1407’'s call for help via her friend ‘Mea’ on 28 October 2007 leads ‘Sabine’ to recall and record the memories of the loss of her own son. Moreover, in response to the requests by other users, on 9 December 2007, via ‘Peter Z.’, ‘Kati1407’ herself offers a heart-wrenching account of her experience of growing up with an alcoholic father, of her sexual ignorance and teenage pregnancy, and the forced adoption of her child immediately after his birth. In this way, as seen in other intimate remembering communities and in ‘real’ world victims’ groups, memories are produced in the course of communication.

However, what is particularly interesting about 'Kati1407''s account in this regard is its form, which highlights what Sharmila Pixy Ferris (2002) has described as the 'new orality' of electronic writing, or 'Netspeak' as termed by David Crystal (2001). Crystal (2001: 24) states that the 'evolution of Netspeak illustrates a real tension which exists between the nature of the medium and the aims and expectations of its users. The heart of the matter seems to be its relationship to spoken and written language'. 'Kati1407''s text contains many of the features of oral conversation: the sentences are generally very short, and the connections between ideas not always logical, and the reader is frequently left to infer her meaning (cf. Crystal, 2001: 26-27). For example, her narrative of the death of her brother reads as follows:

Daniel died in 1979. He fell out of the window in the middle of the night. Just because I wanted to sleep in his bed, but I'd never slept in a bunk-bed before. My big brother tried to keep hold of him, but he didn't manage it. The way to the toilet led straight out of the window...

As Ferris (2002) notes, 'sequentiality [...] is important in writing; spoken language is often understood even when the structure of the sentence is fractured': in 'Kati1407''s account, however, the sequentiality expected of a written text is missing. According to Ferris (2002), 'computers re-introduce many oral characteristics into electronic writing': examples of such characteristics include, for Ferris, 'temporal immediacy, phatic communication, the use of formulaic devices, presence of extra textual content, and

development of community' (cf. Crystal, 2001: 29). These aspects of electronic communication can all be observed in the interactions of community members on www.stasiopfer.de.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that this media form can be viewed as identical to oral communication and oral remembering. The 'temporal immediacy', observed by Ferris, is not based on the synchronicity of the exchanges. The interactions on the forum may read as conversations between individuals in virtual space; nonetheless, if the reader observes the date and time stamps of the postings, it is clear that the interlocutors need not have been 'present' at the same moment. As Crystal (2001: 31) argues, 'the rhythm of an internet interaction is very much slower than that found in a speech situation, and disallows some of conversation's most salient properties' – notably, the possibility of immediate reaction on the part of the recipient of the message *as* the message is being produced (Crystal, 2001: 30).

Moreover, despite the lack of sequentiality in 'Kati1407's' text, it is, nonetheless, still text. Indeed, the structure is reminiscent of written autobiographical narratives. The account opens with 'Kati1407's' birth in 1972 and follows a chronological path through to the present day, with particular focus on her pregnancy and the loss of her son, but also highlighting other significant events in her life, even where these appear to bear no direct relation to the adoption: her brother's death, her mother's remarriage in 1976 and struggle with cancer in 1980, through to her father's

death in 1993. Furthermore, 'Kati1407' makes use of the preterite, which is more common in written rather than spoken forms of German. 'Peter Z.', who posts 'Kati1407's narrative, states that she has given him permission 'to publish some excerpts from her life before and after the adoption'. This use of language suggests that 'Kati1407's past can be viewed as a complete narrative, a book, from which particular parts can be extracted and offered to a waiting readership. Text, unlike spoken language, can be structured and altered after it has been produced: 'meaning may be modified by deleting, editing, and otherwise changing the written words, unlike oral language, where once words are said out loud, they cannot be unsaid, only explained' (Ferris, 2002; cf. Crystal, 2001: 27). It is this mixture of textual and oral features that leads Baron (2000: 247) to argue that electronic language (specifically email) is a hybrid form, similar to a contact-language. Crystal (2001: 48) describes Netspeak as 'something genuinely different in kind – "speech + writing + electronically mediated properties"'.

Catching fleeting memories: Mediated remembering communities

As Erll (2011a: 101; 2011b: 90) contends, narrative emplotment is essential to all forms of memory: narration is a universal mode of structuring experience and knowledge. Welzer (2002: 184-185) argues that autobiographical memories follow socially determined principles of organisation:

In the process of "memory talk", in the communal practice of conversational remembering, through every book read and every film seen, we have all learned

that a proper story has a beginning, a middle and an end, and that it should follow certain basic patterns in order to be communicable.

However, while oral and written forms of memory are both structured by the principles of narration, mediation of memory adds a second layer. Mediated pasts are not external to the medium, but are a construct of it: 'Media are not simply neutral carriers of information about the past. What they appear to encode – versions of past events and persons, cultural values and norms, concepts of collective identity – they are in fact first creating' (Erll, 2011b: 114; cf. Erll, 2011a: 138; van Dijck 2007). For Krämer (1998: 81), 'the medium is not simply the message; but rather the trace of the medium is preserved on the message'. Krämer (1998: 79) argues that medial traces are 'a pre-discursive, a pre-semantic phenomenon: traces do not say anything, but show us something. Above all, what they show must be by chance, that is, produced unintentionally'. In the context of the discussion forum of www.stasiopfer.de, part of this 'trace', of the impact of medium on the message, is the hybridity of orality and textuality and the illusion of temporal immediacy.

This returns us to the remarks at the beginning of this article on the fleeting nature of electronic media. Ferris (2002) notes that one of the features of oral communication is its reliance on sound, 'which is evanescent, having meaning only when it is going out of existence'. This stands in contrast to writing, which appears to offer 'a lasting, permanent quality' (Ferris, 2002). As discussed above, the advent of

electronic media seems to have taken away this ‘integral feature of print’ (Ferris, 2002), leading to fears that memories recorded in this way might be lost. However, if we view the discussion forum www.stasiopfer.de as a remembering community, as an alternative space for communication between individuals with a shared past, we can also argue that this media form in fact gives a relatively fixed form to communicative memories. As Crystal (2001: 135) puts it, ‘our individual e-conversations may come to an end, but the text remains’. If ‘Sabine’, ‘Kati1407’ and ‘Gerd’ had produced their memories orally, outside of the virtual world of the World Wide Web, in November and December 2007, these memories would have been transient and not available for analysis in November 2010. However, in contrast to memories produced in print form, it is unlikely that they will be available in another 10 or 20 years time. This also places this form of memory in the space between the public and the private: as Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading (2009: 6) argue in a similar context, ‘the instantaneity and temporality of social network environments disguise their potential as mediatised ghosts to haunt participants far beyond the life-stage of their online social networking’.

It is, in many respects, this hybridity between fixity and fluidity that has led to the seemingly dichotomous views on the potential of the new media to contribute to cultural memory, with utopian visions of an unlimited capacity for remembering competing with the concepts of a ‘culture of amnesia’ (Huyssen, 1995). Nancy Van House and Elizabeth F. Churchill (2008: 300) note the increasing capacity of

technology to store information on increasingly diverse sectors of our lives, from digital texts such as blogs and social networking sites, through electronic calendars to ‘wearable memory technologies’ capable of recording where we go and what we see. However, Van House and Churchill (2008: 303) note that design choices may restrict the material that is available for analysis in the future, and that both individual and institutional choices are determining ‘what part of our cultural heritage gets preserved, and how’. They fear that ‘potentially useful information will fall through the cracks, no one’s responsibility, not in the interests of anyone with the power and resources to ensure it’s kept and accessible’. The authors argue that this phenomenon is intimately linked to the power of the new media to erase information completely: ‘In the past, preservation was a matter of default, or benign neglect. Preservation was passive, disposal was active. Papers and other memory objects could be left someplace for years, even centuries, then rediscovered and read. Not so digital data’ (Van House and Churchill, 2008: 303). However, although the new media may hold the power to erase memories permanently, we might also observe that forgetting is, in fact, the norm in society, and remembering the exception (see Assmann 2008: 98). As Aleida Assmann (2006: 52) argues, ‘remembering is always unlikely and requires great effort and particular institutions and media’. Decisions have always been made on what is worth keeping and storing, and we cannot know what has been lost – deliberate or accidental destruction of material is not the preserve of the digital age. Close examination of

internet communication, in particular the observation of hybridity between oral and textual communication, reveals that this medium might in fact store, however briefly, otherwise evanescent memories.

Aleida Assmann (2006: 56) divides cultural memory into ‘storage’ and ‘functional’ memory: the ‘functional’ aspect of cultural memory is represented by those canonised texts or artefacts that are part of the active remembering of a given society and it is characterised by a stark limitation on space. However, those memorial media that are not constantly re-read, re-performed, re-exhibited and re-interpreted as part of active cultural memory need not be lost forever, but can be stored in archives or libraries, awaiting possible rediscovery and entrance into functional memory. Elsewhere Assmann (2008) has described the distinction between functional and storage memory as that between ‘canon’ and ‘archive’. The massive storage of information on the internet can, in this respect, be viewed as an ever-expanding archive and the texts produced on www.stasiopfer.de as part of this collection of potential memory media, or ‘stored’ cultural memory (cf. Pentzold, 2009: 262).

Nonetheless, as has been argued above, these texts are simultaneously part of communicative memory between individuals using the forum. Although these memories are mediated in textual form, if we follow Erll’s (2011a: 132; 2011b: 33) definition of communicative and cultural memory as being based on reception, we can see that, while they may perform a different function in the future, in the present, these texts are both

produced and received as the lived experience of a particular social group. The mediation of communication in this form thus means that the discussion forum has the potential to be a medium both of stored cultural memory and of communicative remembering. In this way it produces what I will term a *mediated remembering community*. The forum allows individuals who are not simultaneously present to interact and exchange memories of an assumed shared past, to build a community based on shared goals; however, the medium itself structures and leaves its trace on the memories that it stages.

Mediated communicative memories are not found exclusively in this form. Pentzold (2009: 264) observes that the ‘talk’ pages of Wikipedia can also be viewed as written communication and, when read alongside the final internet article, might be seen to ‘fix’ the ‘floating gap’ between communicative and cultural memory, allowing it to be examined through discourse analysis. As Assmann (2007: 14) notes:

There is a seamless transition from ‘living’ eyewitnesses and ‘authentic’ relicts to their integration into videos, films, exhibitions and other medial stagings. The still-present of the past merges into its mediatization and reproduces a quasi-sensual presence of the absent.

However, in the discussion forum, as in the talk pages of Wikipedia, this process is immediate: the living memory produced by the users of the site is instantly stored and recorded. Moreover, it is recorded *as* communication between individuals, and in a form

available, if not for future generations, at least for contemporaries, including those with no personal memories of this period. In this way, discussion forums not only offer a space for the voicing of traumatic or dissonant pasts (cf. Bird, 2011: 98), but also provides the memories produced here with the potential to have collective relevance (see Erll, 2011a: 137; Erll, 2011b: 114). Hoskins (2009a: 102) argues that with the advent of the new media, and specifically the internet, ‘the nature and potential for the representation and historicisation of people’s lives has been transformed’ and ‘the traces of people’s lives are increasingly found in their digital communications’. Analyses of memorial processes in societies using electronic and digital media, must therefore, take into account the blurring of archive and network, cultural and communicative memory, and written and spoken forms, the introduction of ‘different equations of ephemera into our remembering processes’ (Hoskins 2009b: 31), if they are to do justice to the complex processes by which pasts circulate in the new media cultures of the present.

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Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, all translations from German are my own.
- 2 The website, discussion forum, guest book and blog are archived and freely accessible. Contributors are informed in the site policy that their contributions are viewable without restriction in the public domain.
- 3 All references to the discussion forum are to posts available at: http://stasiopfer.de/component/option,com_simpleboard/Itemid,199/func,showcat/catid,4/. The pseudonyms used in this paper are derived from the screen name of the poster, who will be considered the author of his or her text.
- 4 From 1962 until the end of the GDR, the West German government frequently paid substantial sums of money to the East for the release of political prisoners into West Germany. This practice became known as being ‘bought free’.

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